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Zone 7 Contributes to Environmental Study of Delta Solutions *New Conveyance Could Protect Habitat, Water Supply Reliability*

The Livermore-Amador Valley's Zone 7 Water Agency will contribute approximately \$1.5 million over the next two years toward a crucial study of alternatives for reliably conveying water across or around the Delta in an environmentally sound manner.

The agreement to fund the effort jointly with other State Water Project contractors, and with federal Central Valley Project contractors that also receive Delta-conveyed water, was approved by the Zone 7 Board Wednesday night.

Typically, 80 percent of Zone 7's water supply originates as Sierra snowmelt and is conveyed by the State Water Project through the ecologically fragile Delta. The estuary faces mounting issues related to endangered species, as well as threats of flooding, seawater intrusion from earthquakes, and rising sea levels from global climate change. Other stressors include invasive species and contamination from agricultural drainages, wastewater treatment plant discharges and recreational activities.

"Here in the Valley, what's at stake is the reliability and quality of water supplies that Zone 7 delivers to its customers," said Board President Sarah Palmer.

The existing system of through-Delta conveyance to Zone 7 and other south-of-Delta water contractors, including the Alameda County Water District and the Santa Clara Valley Water District, is creating several concerns. First, the water quality degrades as the fresh water flows through the Delta, gaining salt and organics along the way. Second,

the flow of water to the pumps creates reverse flow in the south Delta channels, pulling with it large numbers of fish, some of which can be drawn into the pumps.

Last year's federal court ruling by Judge Oliver Wanger regarding Delta smelt has significantly reduced the amount of water the State Water Project can move through the Delta and deliver to its contractors. Additional smelt-related regulations, issued this week in a new biological opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, further limit pump operations and further reduce the reliability of State Water Project supplies. More restrictions may be looming for salmon and other fish species.

Zone 7 is among state and federal water contractors that will share funding of the total \$140 million Delta Habitat Conservation and Conveyance Program to prepare an Environmental Impact Report/Study, along with preliminary design of projects identified in the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP). This work is necessary before any decision on selecting a project or building a new conveyance facility can be made.

The BDCP aims to provide a framework for addressing endangered species protection as a whole and not in a piecemeal, species-by-species fashion decided by the courts in response to lawsuits. This broad-based, collaborative effort includes environmental organizations, wildlife agencies and water districts. A preliminary plan includes conservation measures such as habitat restoration, through-Delta improvements and new around-Delta conveyance facilities to separate and secure the movement of fresh water supply while at the same time helping to restore habitat for the Delta's ailing fish populations.

"This is a study of how to conserve habitat and the ecosystem by changing the way we plumb the Delta, and a piece of that is a way to do conveyance," Palmer said.

She noted that the study doesn't presuppose any particular findings and that while options for a new conveyance system will be evaluated in the environmental study, no decision has been made.

“There is bound to be much debate over how to achieve the co-equal objectives of water reliability and enhancing the Delta ecosystem, and controversy over proposed projects to achieve those goals -- which could include an alternative conveyance as well as environmental restoration,” Palmer said. “But much will boil down to creating credible safeguards for the operation of a new, more flexible Delta conveyance system that benefits habitat, protects water-supply reliability, and preserves the livelihood of communities in the Delta.”

Around-the-Delta conveyance would not be the same project as the Peripheral Canal project rejected by state voters in 1982. The conveyance facility contemplated in the draft BDCP conservation strategy would be considerably smaller, and would be built and operated as much with habitat protection as water-supply reliability in mind. It is Zone 7’s understanding that for urban water contractors, including those in Southern California, the issue is about protecting reliability of historic entitlements and not about getting more water rights. Meanwhile, many environmentalists believe that coupling a new conveyance with investment in the Delta ecosystem is the most environmentally positive way to repair the Delta and, at the same time, maintain the reliability of vital water supplies. Separating the adverse effects of artificially moving fresh water through the Delta would allow the Delta to function more as a natural estuary with fluctuating salinity to protect native species. If a new conveyance is built, water could still be released back into the Delta on an equitable basis for the health of the Delta.

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Zone 7 Water Agency is one of the 10 active zones of the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District. The District was established by the State Legislature in October 1949 to solve problems of flooding, drainage, channel erosion and water supply and conservation in Alameda County. In 1957, by popular vote, Zone 7 became a special district governed by a seven-member board of directors. Along with flood protection, Zone 7 supplies water to all of eastern Alameda County and a population of nearly 200,000. Treated water is sold wholesale to local retailers, including the cities of Livermore and Pleasanton, the Dublin San Ramon Services District, and the California Water Service Company. Zone 7 also distributes untreated water to local agriculture operations and golf courses.